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*A Thousand Splendid Suns*

By Khaled Hosseini

**Summary:** When the story begins, Mariam is living with her mother in a shack on the outskirts of Herat, Afghanistan. Mariam’s father Jalil, a prominent figure in Herat, was embarrassed by Nana’s pregnancy and eventual birth of Mariam; he built Nana and Mariam a house outside of town, providing them with food and supplies. Now a teenager, Mariam looks forward to Jalil’s weekly visits. Nana is annoyed with Mariam’s forgiving and jovial spirit, often condemning the visits and creating a negative environment in the house. After Jalil fails to deliver on a promised trip to the movies, Mariam ventures into Herat and finds Jalil’s house. She is turned away and urged to return home; Mariam is persistent, even sleeping in the street that night. She returns home in shame the following morning, only to discover Nana had hung herself. Full of denial and self-blame, Mariam is taken in by Jalil. The novelty of living with Jalil quickly wears off and Mariam begins to spend all of her time in her room. Anxious to get Mariam out of the house, Jalil’s wives arrange an impromptu marriage between Mariam and Rasheed, a business man from Kabul. The marriage ceremony is abrupt, and the new couple travel to Rasheed’s house in eastern Afghanistan. Mariam is initially uncomfortable in Kabul and mortified about being a wife; the couple’s relationship is awkward and strained.

As time passes, the tension subsides and Mariam becomes pregnant. Both are elated about the coming child; shortly into the pregnancy, however, Mariam has a miscarriage. As further pregnancy attempts prove futile Rasheed becomes irritable and short tempered with Mariam, driving him to the point of making Mariam chew on rocks. The novel moves to the story of Laila, daughter of a woman who initially befriended Mariam. Laila is a teenager, presently dealing with the taunts of neighborhood bullies and potentially her first boyfriend.

**Analysis:** A Thousand Splendid Suns is written in a completely different style than my previous independent novel, *the Alchemist*. *The Alchemist* was often vague and abstract, while Splendid Suns is a more straightforward narrative. Though I was able to struggle through almost all of the illusions and figurative language of *the Alchemist*, I much prefer this novel because literary interpretation is not one of my strong points. Hosseini says exactly what each character does and thinks, while Coelho encouraged the reader to ponder each character’s motives.

The sign of a well written historical fiction is when the fictional plot and historical content work in harmony, as opposed to one element dominating over the other. Thus far Hosseini has created a perfect balance between these elements, showing how Soviet control and civil war crippled Afghanistan, while also creating a tale where the characters actions are not entirely defined by these events. For example, the first ‘chapter’ of the book is about a young girl who is thrust into marriage; the Soviet- Afghan struggle rolls in the background, and at critical moments highlights what is going on in story. An example of a bland historical fiction, in my opinion, is when the author bases each character’s actions off of what is historically accurate to the point where it ceases to be *fiction.*

Another aspect that I have enjoyed about *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the foreshadowing, and at times lack of information and description. As this section closed, the story of Mariam was ending and the story of Laila was beginning. Because the characters of Mariam and Laila are indirectly related, it leads the reader to believe that later in the novel their respective stories will become intertwined. Additionally, Hosseini leaves out sensitive information. He mentions Mariam’s unease about certain aspects of being a wife without explicitly saying what is meant. The author also requires that the reader infer Mariam’s miscarriage based on a vague description, and Rasheed’s subsequent reaction.

I have thus far enjoyed *A Thousand Splendid Suns* for reasons completely differing from those of why I enjoyed *The Alchemist.* Specifically, I appreciate the balance between historical accuracy and creative freedom; I have also enjoyed the foreshadowing usage and, at times, lack of information.

**Application:** *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has shown that childhood ignorance, and the happiness that accompanies it, have spanned time and culture. Mariam is aware of the reasons her and her mother cannot live with Jalil, yet still sees genuine goodness in Jalil’s soul. The girl yearns for Jalil’s affection and obsessively counts the hours until his next visit. The truth of the situation comes crashing down when Jalil refuses to accept Mariam at his residence. Mariam’s jovial spirit is crushed, and the sadness is further compounded by her mother’s suicide.

Childhood ignorance has continued to be used as a theme because children themselves have not changed. An obvious example is the belief in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. Despite the sheer impracticalities of such characters, children wholeheartedly invest their happiness in the tales their parents tell them. A parallel example in the literary world would be *To Kill a Mockingbird;* Scout is unaware of the racial injustice occurring all around him. Similarly, Mariam cannot see through the fake smile that Jalil puts on around her.

With regard to human nature, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* illustrates the historically based dominance of men. Mariam fulfills Rasheed’s wishes without question, knowing the consequences of refusing to do so. At the end of section one, Rasheed goes so far as to make Mariam chews on rocks. Though more prevalent in other parts of the world, male dominance stills occurs in America with regard to the compensation differences between men and women.

Two characters with the largest difference in attitude are Nana and Laila; together they illustrate the differences in human roles and behaviors. Nana is pessimistic and doesn’t find joy in the daily toil of life; she condemns Mariam’s optimism and generally content attitude. Though the mother and daughter live together, their differences in attitude show that humans are not significantly influenced by the attitudes of others.

The human ideal of love, forced and natural, is also explored. Mariam is forced to wed a man she has never met in her life. After an initially strained relationship, the pair comes to tolerate each other. Laila, however, falls for a neighbor boy named Tariq. These two different stories contrast forced and natural love, and also satisfy literature’s purpose of explaining human ideals.

Childhood ignorance will remain a theme in literature so long as children continue to be ignorant. This is easily illustrated by children of all generation’s belief in Santa Clause and the   
Tooth Fairy. Human nature is explored through Rasheed’s dominating tendencies, while human behaviors are demonstrated by the conflicting attitudes of Nana and Mariam. Hosseini also touches on the human ideal of love in the realtionships between Mariam and Rasheed, and Tariq and Laila.